

Smart lawns for pollinators

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Pollinators, especially bees, provide us with valuable services by pollinating plants that contribute to food production and beautify our landscape. Disturbingly, there is increasing evidence that many important pollinator species are in decline. As people develop more and more land, the amount of habitat where bees and other pollinators can nest and find flower resources (food) is shrinking. This is especially true in urban and suburban areas where farmland or natural habitats have been replaced by subdivisions and parking lots. Smart gardeners can make a difference by taking steps to reduce and minimize the impact of their practices on the decline of bees.

A moderately maintained lawn has great potential to increase food and habitat resources for pollinators. Your lawn can be an “oasis” of green in an otherwise gray, asphalt-dominated “desert,” providing food and habitat for hundreds of bee species. Lawns can act as critical stepping stones for these beneficial insects by bridging gaps between remnants of natural habitat.

Traditional lawn management can be a high maintenance undertaking with multiple chemical inputs of fertilizers and pesticides along with physical inputs of mowing, weeding, aerating and re-seeding. Traditional lawns that are aesthetically pleasing to most people create a dense, green carpet with almost nothing to offer pollinators and other beneficial organisms.

Bee-friendly lawns are not traditional!

One of the most effective ways to reduce negative impacts on pollinators from lawn management is to [increase the mowing height](#) which promotes healthier roots that can withstand challenges from pests and drought. Another is to reduce pesticide and fertilizer inputs. You can still have a healthy and beautiful lawn without having to treat it each year.

By choosing suitable plants such as bunch-type turfgrasses, fine and tall fescues or native perennials that don’t need as many chemicals, you can have a pleasing, welcoming landscape. In addition, using the



All photos Rebecca Finneran, MSUE

The importance of pollinators

Pollinators are essential to our environment and are uniquely linked to our food supply. They pollinate more than 85 percent of the world’s flowering plants and are ultimately responsible for the seeds and fruits that humans, song birds and even black bears consume. Recent concerns about the decline of pollinating insects have caused gardeners to learn how to make positive contributions towards their conservation. Understanding habitat needs and food sources while adjusting our garden maintenance routine is a step forward in pollinator conservation.

One often thinks first of the honey bee as a pollinator, but over 400 species of native bees live in Michigan. Native bees come in many shapes and sizes, and are often uniquely linked with native trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants, but will also work a widely diverse garden plant palette.

Beneficial insects also make up the world’s hardest-working workforce by keeping detrimental insects in check. A diverse selection of native and non-native plants, judicious reduction of pesticide use and observant gardeners come together to create a strategy for preserving bees and other “good bugs” in our landscapes and gardens.

[right plants in the right place](#) reduces the work for you and has tremendous environmental benefits.

Although the lawns many admire most look like perfectly manicured golf courses, there are several alternatives you can incorporate into your landscaping. These alternatives not only look beautiful and have many environmental benefits, but will also save time when you discontinue the mowing-fertilizing-weeding routine of your traditional lawn.

Lawn alternatives to encourage pollinators

The types of alternative lawns are only limited by your imagination! For a more traditional style lawn, you can choose bunch-type turfgrasses and ornamental plants like *Liriope*, *Carex* or blue fescue, creating nesting habitat for beneficial insects that provide natural insect control.

If you want an alternative that still resembles a classic lawn, you can replace your turf with alternative “lawns” like white or Dutch micro-clover, which does not grow as tall as traditional clover, while still providing nectar and pollen for bees. You can also replace your lawn with groundcovers like creeping thyme, one of the lowest growing thyme varieties that produces lots of flowers for bees, requires minimal maintenance and looks beautiful. Some other groundcovers include *Ajuga* ‘Catlin’s Giant’ or *Pachysandra*.

For a more natural look, turn your lawn into a low maintenance prairie filled with native plants of varying heights and textures. For example, *Helenium* (sneeze weed), Globe thistle and *Asclepias* (milkweed) will create a diverse, colorful and eye-catching landscape all year round. You can gradually reduce the amount of turfgrass area within your current lawn and replace it with native flower beds or expand your ornamental plantings.



Groundcovers like *Pachysandra* (left) and *Ajuga* (right) produce flowers for bees, are low maintenance and beautiful.

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Turning your lawn into a low-maintenance prairie filled with native plants will attract pollinators.

Is it a weed?

Although dandelions are considered unsightly by some, they are a great resource for hungry pollinators! Incorporating these flowering plants will encourage and sustain visiting pollinators while giving you bursts of color throughout the growing season. Lawn weeds like clover and dandelion are one of the largest food resources for bees in urban areas. Consider incorporating short flowering lawn “weeds” such as clover, micro-clover, trefoil, self-heal/heal all (*Prunella*), creeping thyme and crocus. Choosing the right pollinator-friendly plants has the added benefit of crowding out unwanted weeds, maintaining moisture within the soil and fixing nitrogen to reduce the need for fertilizing.

Although pollinators get a bad reputation because some can sting, they are only interested in the food and habitat in your lawn and garden, and not interested in bothering you. As you look to make your yard more friendly for pollinators, remember to reduce the amount of chemicals you use in your gardens, never spray any flowering plants in bloom or bare soil, and **always** read and follow label directions. Reimagine (bee-imagine) your idea of a perfect lawn. Does it need to be a picture-perfect turf landscape, or a perfect paradise for you and pollinators?

A field guide, “Bees of the Great Lakes region and wildflowers to support them,” is for sale at www.shop.msu.edu if you want to learn more.

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